

Men and Women's Support For War: Accounting for the gender gap in public opinion

Written by Ben Clements

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BEN CLEMENTS, JAN 19 2012

In little over two decades, British forces have been involved in operations of varying type and duration, including the Gulf War, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq and, most recently, Libya. Both at the outset and during the course of these military operations, commercial polling companies and academic surveys have endeavoured to record public attitudes towards the conflicts

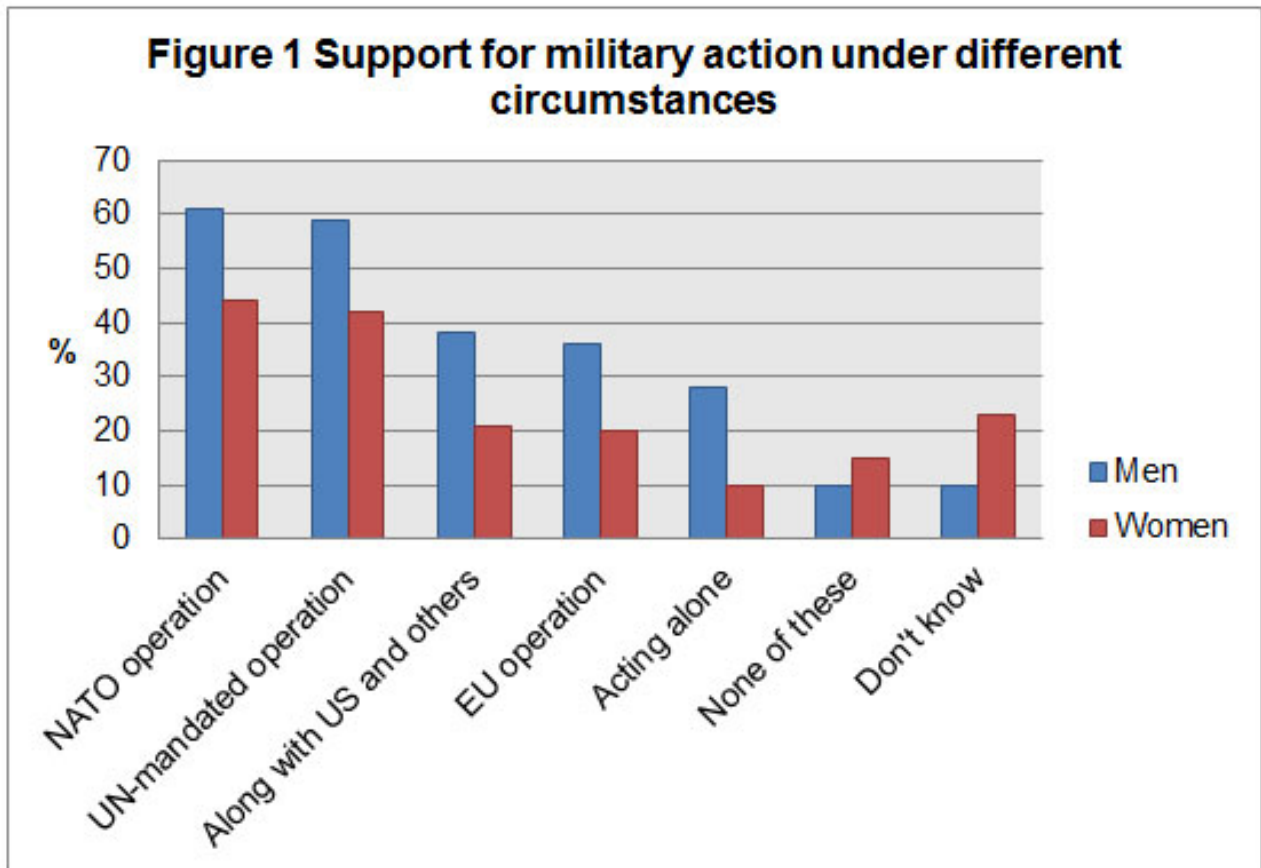
Public opinion within Britain

Public opinion data are a valuable source for academic research into the groups within the British population who tend to be for or against involvement in specific military conflicts; and indeed for identifying those groups who tend to have 'hawkish' or 'dovish' stances on foreign affairs more generally. Recent research into the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan showed that approval for the wars divided along sociological and attitudinal lines.[1] For example, men were more likely than women to approve of British involvement in both conflicts. Analysis of public opinion towards military action in Libya in 2011 told a similar story;[2] again, men were more supportive of military action. This 'gender gap' in British public opinion is also a longstanding feature of public opinion in the US in this area.[3]

Earlier research into attitudes towards military conflict showed that a 'gender gap' was also present in polling data collected in Britain during the early post-WW2 decades. Based upon various polls conducted in the period 1955-66, asking about approval for the potential use of force in different scenarios, there was an average 'gender gap' of 8.5% in British public opinion (men: 47.1%; women 38.6%).[4] Recent evidence from a Chatham House -YouGov Survey conducted in 2011 shows that, when asked hypothetically about a series of military intervention scenarios, men were more likely than women to support action being taken in every case (see Figure 1).

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Source: The Chatham House-YouGov Survey 2011.

Question: 'Military action could be undertaken by Britain alone or in coalition with other countries. Under which of the following circumstances do you think it would be acceptable for Britain to take military action? Please tick all that apply or, if you think military action would never be acceptable, choose 'none of these'.'

The Chatham House-YouGov Survey also explored attitudes towards taking military action against Iran – if necessary – in order to prevent it from having nuclear weapons. Again, men were more likely than women to support such a move (39% compared to 28%). Levels of opposition were near-identical (47% for men and 48% for women); though women were more likely to have no opinion either way (24% responded 'don't know' compared to 15% of men).

Comparing public opinion in Britain with other countries

Britain's role in recent military conflicts has occurred under the auspices of multi-national efforts, such as the role of NATO in Afghanistan and Libya, or the 'coalition of the willing' in Iraq. This generates an interest in comparing public opinion *across* countries, as well as *within* countries, particularly in those states contributing to military efforts and also in those countries who may have explicitly opposed taking military action (as Germany, France and many other countries did in the run up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003). From this data, we learn that the 'gender gap' in attitudes towards military action is not only a characteristic of public opinion in Britain.

Table 1 compares attitudes towards the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq using data from the Pew Global Attitudes Project, based on cross-national surveys conducted in 2003 (Iraq) and 2010 (Afghanistan). For Iraq, Table 1 shows responses to a question that asked respondents whether they favoured or opposed military action to end Saddam Hussein's rule in Iraq. The question on Afghanistan asks whether troops should stay until the situation has stabilised,

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or should be withdrawn as soon as possible. Note that the first question includes respondents from Italy while the second question includes respondents from the US.

Table 1 Cross-national public opinion: Iraq and Afghanistan						
	Britain % Favour	France % Favour	Germany % Favour	Italy % Favour	Poland % Favour	Spain % Favour
<i>Iraq</i>						
Men	53	22	32	21	30	19
Women	34	20	25	14	15	8
<i>Difference</i>	+19	+2	+7	+7	+15	+11
	Britain % Keep troops	France % Keep troops	Germany % Keep troops	Poland % Keep troops	Spain % Keep troops	US % Keep troops
<i>Afghanistan</i>						
Men	57	53	44	51	51	57
Women	47	43	37	46	43	47
<i>Difference</i>	+10	+10	+7	+5	+8	+10

Source: Pew Global Attitude Surveys 2003 and 2010.

Note: Excludes 'don't know' responses.

Questions:

2003: 'Thinking about possible war with Iraq, would you favor or oppose (Survey country) joining the U.S. and other allies in military action in Iraq to end Saddam Hussein's rule?' and 'Thinking about possible war with Iraq, would you favor or oppose the U.S. and other allies taking military action in Iraq to end Saddam Hussein's rule?'

2010: 'Do you think the U.S. and NATO should keep military troops in Afghanistan until the situation has stabilized, or do you think the U.S. and NATO should remove their troops as soon as possible?'

While the size of the 'gender gap' varies across countries, its direction does not: men are more likely than women to have favoured military action in Iraq and to support troops staying in Afghanistan. The average cross-national 'gender gap' is 8% for Afghanistan and 10% for Iraq. Similarly, Table 2 shows attitudes towards military action in Libya by gender for six countries, using polling data collected at the outset of military action. The data tell a similar story to that in Table 1. The magnitude of the 'gender gap' in support varies across countries – produced by subtracting women's level of support from that of men's – but it is in the same direction in each case: men were more supportive than women, with an average 'gender gap' in support of 15%.

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Table 2 Cross-national public opinion: Libya						
	Britain	France	Germany	Italy	Spain	US
	%	%	%	%	%	%
	Support	Support	Support	Support	Support	Support
Men	43	48	44	37	45	38
Women	30	33	23	22	30	25
Difference	+13	+15	+21	+15	+15	+13

Source: Harris / *Financial Times* March-April 2011

Question: 'To what extent do you support or oppose the current military intervention in Libya?'

Conclusion

There is evidence then to suggest a reasonably consistent 'gender gap', over time and across countries. Indeed, recent research noted that 'it would be rare to find scholarship in which gender differences on the question of using military force are not present'.^[5] What accounts for the 'gender gap' in attitudes towards war and military intervention? Scholarly research has focused on three particular theoretical explanations: *empathy*, *consensus orientation*, and *political feminism*.^[6] *Empathy* relates to women's supposed greater compassion for the victims of war, though there is disagreement as to whether this is due to genetic factors, early socialisation experiences or women's mothering role in society. The *consensus orientation* is based on psychological differences between women and men, with the former laying greater value on group relationships and the use of cooperation and compromise, rather than aggressive means, to resolve disputes. The *political feminism* perspective argues that, rather than women *per se* being opposed to war, feminists (which could include men) tend to be against as military conflicts are usually fought in men's interests and the costs of war fall heavily on civilian women and children.^[7]

Further research is needed, in Britain and elsewhere, into the relevance and explanatory power of these theoretical perspectives in accounting for the 'gender gap' in attitudes on military conflict, where states exercise their 'hard power'. Research could also examine whether there are differences, within countries and cross-nationally, in men's and women's attitudes on other issues relating to foreign affairs, including those where countries can exercise their 'soft power'

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[1] B, Clements, (2011), 'Examining public attitudes towards recent foreign policy issues: Britain's involvement in the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts', *POLITICS*, 32: 63-71.

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[2] B. Clements (2012), 'Public opinion in Britain towards military action in Libya: A micro-level analysis', forthcoming, *POLITICS*.

[3] V. Burris (2008), 'From Vietnam to Iraq: Continuity and Change in Between-Group Differences in Support for Military Action', *Social Problems*, 55: 443-479; M. Nincic and D. J. Nincic. 2002. 'Race, Gender, and War', *Journal of Peace Research*, 39: 547-568.

[4] L. C. O. Brandes (1994), *Public Opinion, International Security Policy, and Gender. The United States and Great Britain since 1945*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Department of Political Science, Yale University, p. 107.

[5] R. C. Eichenberg and R. J. Stoll (2011), 'Gender Differences or Parallel Publics? The Dynamics of Defense Spending Opinion in the United States, 1965-2007', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 1-18, DOI:10.1177/0022002711420983, p. 5

[6] D. J. Brookes and B. A. Valentino (2011), 'A war of one's own: Understanding the gender gap in support for war', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 75(2): 270-286.

[7] *Ibid*, pp. 271-3.